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AUTHOR Murphy, Patricia D.; Harrold, Robert L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the changing assessment requirements of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) in regard to undergraduate and graduate education. It notes that although the NCA initiative on assessment has been in place since 1989, institutions are at various stages in their development and implementation of assessment plans and programs. Assessment activities are expected to evaluate learning outcomes in the general education component of programs, in the major, and in graduate and professional education programs. In recent years the NCA has required evidence of the use of assessment data in making improvements in learning and instruction; also, assessment data is expected to contribute to decision making, curriculum revisions, faculty development, improvement of faculty teaching, improvement of student learning, and to have a role in planning, budgeting, and faculty rewards. Overall, institutions are expected to have in place policies and procedures that make assessment "count". Suggestions are included for helping institutions use the assessment process to improve learning, program review, planning, and budgeting. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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Dr. Patricia D. Murphy, Dean
Assessment & Institutional Research

Dr. Robert L. Harrold
Professor of Animal & Range Sciences

North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105-5075

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Dr. Patricia D. Murphy, Dean
Assessment & Institutional Research

Dr. Robert L. Harrold
Professor of Animal & Range Sciences

North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105-5075

Assessment: A Moving Target with Rising Expectations

Although the NCA initiative on assessment has been in place since 1989, and assessment plans are filed, institutions are at various stages in their development and implementation of an assessment plan and program. The expectations of both NCA and institutions are rising in relation to assessment. What "passed" three years ago is no longer sufficient. The emphasis on evidence relating to what students are learning in order to improve that learning continues from outside and inside the academy. How are institutions and consultant-evaluator teams preparing to meet these continually rising expectations?

What the Expectations Are

Institutions currently are at various stages in the implementation of such activities. In the "early years," institutions began with a "plan to plan." As a member of the Assessment Plan Review Committee, we approved "plans to plan" at that time. Today, more is expected.

From the beginning there have been several steps implicit in the development of an assessment program. These have included the following kinds of activities.

1. An assessment committee was created and someone "put in charge."

2. Faculty identified the learning outcomes expected from the general education component of the program, from the major, and from graduate and professional education programs. These activities prospered, first in the major; then in general education; and more slowly in graduation education.

3. Faculty decided how to gather the evidence of student learning by finding or developing measuring instruments, specific enough to provide evidence of where student learning is going well and where that learning may need to be improved. Many ideas and techniques for these activities have been developed and shared at numerous national and regional assessment conferences.

Paper presented at the North Central Association annual meeting, Chicago, April 1997.

4. Institutions are beginning to show use of the results of the assessment activities as part of the decision making process to improve that learning, where the intent is to improve faculty teaching and student learning.

Teams visiting institutions in the last two years have expected, as a minimum, evidence of use of assessment data in making improvements in student learning.

The revised ***Criteria Three and Four*** make it clear that "more is needed." It is expected that the plan be routinely updated, reviewed, and revised. In addition, institutions need to be able to document that assessment has improved student learning.

The Commission (1996) has adopted a pattern of evidence for graduate education and further stated that this pattern "will not be the only outcome of the Commission's work on graduate education" (p.1). As you may recall, the Commission has also adopted a statement regarding the assessment of student learning in distance delivery programs (CIHE, 1995).

Assessment of student academic achievement for NCA is concerned with evidence of student learning for the purpose of improving that learning. Assessment requires measurement of learning outcomes (*Criterion Three*, p. 4). The purpose is documentable student academic achievement to use for improvement.

From assessment, evidence about student learning is expected: in general education, in the major, and in graduate and professional education. No academic program can be omitted. The bottom line is learning and the purpose is improving that learning.

From cumulating research evidence we now know more about learning. We know more about relationships between learning activities, teaching methods, and student achievement. In addition, we know more about how learning takes place and about strategies that facilitate learning (see, for example, Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Davis, 1990).

Assessment of student academic achievement in the general studies program is expected. Several outcomes expected from the general education program are cited in *Criterion Three*. Student learning in the major is to be assessed as well as achievement of specified learning outcomes by students in graduate and professional programs.

The revised ***Criteria Three and Four*** (1996) and the López (1996) paper reporting desired characteristics of assessment programs by consultant-evaluators make the expectations very clear.

Evidence is also required of use of assessment data in making improvements in learning and in instruction. The question to be asked continually of all assessment activities for improvement is: What evidence is provided by the activity that tells us what

learning is going well and where it may need to be improved. The results are to provide faculty with information useful for improvement. The philosophy is that "all things can be improved." The whole purpose is "documentable student academic achievement" to use for improvement.

All this is where most institutions are or have been in the last few years. The target has moved up again, rising higher.

Assessment data are now expected to contribute to decision making, curriculum revisions, faculty development, improvement of faculty teaching, improvement of student learning, having a role in planning (*Criterion Three*, p. 4), a role in budgeting (*Criterion Three*, p. 4), and a role in faculty rewards (*Criterion Three*, p. 6). Assessment activities and results are to be clearly related to other planning and budgeting processes, including program review. Institutions are expected to document these relationships.

Although all this is a "large order," there are many more resources available to assist institutions and visiting teams than there were even a few years ago. The revised ***Criteria Three and Four*** provide guidance for response and action by the institution and by the visiting team. The López paper is very useful here as well.

Institutions are expected to have in place policies and procedures that make assessment "count" --- such as, in the faculty promotion and tenure process, as scholarship, and as evidence of effective teaching.

Where is Your Institution

Institutions currently are at various stages in the implementation of assessment activities. Institutional activities can be identified along a continuum from inadequate through adequate to exemplary in relation to the moving target of expectations for assessment activities.

Experience with these activities on campuses have resulted in some principles or guidelines to follow to be more productive. For example, expected learning outcomes are more useful if clearly stated and measurable. In developing or selecting measuring instruments, the "match" with the expected outcomes is critical. How the data are collected and analyzed affect validity and usefulness. Procedures for the distribution of results need to be established. Feedback loops are critical to the use of results.

Where is your institution? Planning to plan; beginning assessment in the major, general education, graduate education; using assessment data for improving learning?

If your institution has gone no farther than the first three steps, you are already behind. Expectations now require **use** in faculty rewards, program reviews, institutional planning, and budgeting which constitute the next steps in developing a complete institutional assessment program.

Patricia D. Murphy and Robert L. Harrold, NDSU, Fargo, ND 58105-5075

I have not yet visited a campus that has reached the fourth level, that of having assessment results integrated with planning, budgeting, and program review.

How to Reach the Moving Target

If you and your institution are not yet at the last step, how do you get there? There are many more resources available to assist institutions and visiting teams than there were even a few years ago. NCA supports the position that universities must retain responsibility for assuring the quality of academic programs and degrees.

Improving learning. You can use assessment data for decision making concerning the curriculum, instruction, programs, and services. Randolph (1994) urges making use of assessment data for its most obvious purpose, to improve student learning.

1. Use the results to improve student learning since improvement of learning is the primary purpose of assessment.
   curriculum or courses can be modified
   faculty expertise can be strengthened
   methods of instruction can be changed

2. Use results to plan faculty development programs.
   e.g., technology-based instruction
   teaching critical thinking
   facilitating student writing skills
   how to interpret and use assessment data

3. Provide rewards for faculty efforts in assessment.

Program review. Assessment should be an important part of program review. Assessment data should be considered in making judgments about a program.

Traditionally, academic program review has focused heavily on inputs. These have included such characteristics as cost, need/demand, quality, centrality, productivity, and marketability. On many campuses program review serves the same (or almost the same) purpose as NCA's concept of institutional effectiveness. The question of "how well is the institution accomplishing its purposes" or "how well is the institution doing what it says it is doing" is about the same as the program review question of "how well is the program doing." Examples of effectiveness indicators include demand for the graduates, service to non-majors, characteristics of students enrolled, cost per student credit hour, cost vs. revenue, and alumni support. These are also typical of program review. Assessment of student academic achievement is a part of institutional effectiveness but the two are not synonymous.

Patricia D. Murphy and Robert L. Harrold, NDSU, Fargo, ND 58105-5075

The quality of the program review process is critical. Barak and Brier (1990) list principles of fairness, comprehensiveness, timeliness, communication, objectivity, credibility, and utility be followed in "good" program review processes to be successful with useful results. Data from assessment of student learning should have an important role in program review. After all, the primary purpose of an institution is, by definition, the promotion of learning. Thus, student academic achievement is an important part of program quality and program productivity. Assessment data need to be considered in making judgments about a program.

Planning. Assessment should also be tied to institutional planning. Data from assessment activities contribute to identification of academic strengths and weaknesses. Results from assessment are considered in institutional planning process, which, in turn, affect budgeting for implementation of new ideas or modifications.

Budgeting. Assessment results as well as program review and planning data are supposed to impact budgeting and resource allocation. Consultant-evaluators expect to find a relationship between assessment activities and the other management processes of program review, planning, and budgeting. Data and other information from the four processes are expected to influence each other. It is expected to go beyond simply overlapping membership on the various committees.

Improvement is the goal of each process. It seems strange that institutions would not take advantage of data available to assist in improving the overall health of the institution.

Teams are looking for evidence of the integration of planning, budgeting, program review, and assessment. While each has its own specific purpose, with integration, use is made of the contribution of all components.

Resources available. There are now many resources available to help you and your institution reach the moving target. Keep track of the moving target. Read widely, including the NCA publications. Keep your institution moving, incrementally, trying new things. Give wide publicity to examples of successes. Be aware of the ongoing assessment activities of specialized accrediting agencies. Some, such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), are placing great emphasis on the assessment of student learning. Some others include accounting, business, teacher education, and nursing.

Conclusion

In times of institutional "downsizing" and "restructuring," departments and faculty have to be assured that they will not be punished for assessment activities. What matters is what is done with the assessment results. Assessment activities need to result in evidence. This evidence must be used. Assessment activities must "count," in promotion and tenure decisions, in planning, and in budget allocations.

Patricia D. Murphy and Robert L. Harrold, NDSU, Fargo, ND 58105-5075

By 1995-96, visiting teams had shifted their emphasis from assessment plans to the assessment programs and use of results. Now, the target has moved to the tie-in with program review, planning, and budgeting. Every institutional self-study and every evaluation team must judge the strengths and usefulness of an institution's assessment program.

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Patricia D. Murphy and Robert L. Harrold, NDSU, Fargo, ND 58105-5075

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Dr. Patricia D. Murphy, Dean
Assessment & Institutional Research
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105-5075
pmurphy@plains.nodak.edu
Ph: 701/231-8262
Fax: 701/231-9419

Dr. Robert L. Harrold, Professor
Animal & Range Sciences
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105-5727
rharrold@plains.nodak.edu
Ph: 701/231-7659
Fax: 701/231-7590